

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the beginning of the war between the USSR and Germany. On 22 June 1941 National Socialist Germany invaded the Soviet Union, launching a war that turned into the bloodiest and most inhumane conflict of the 20th century. The military action that began on 1 September 1939 with Germany's aggression against Poland took on a new dimension. It expanded again on 7 December 1941 when Japan launched an attack on Pearl Harbor, and on 11 December when Germany declared war on the US. These developments transformed the conflict in Europe into World War II.

This new phase of the war was unprecedented insofar as German forces designated civilians, not only the soldiers of the Red Army, as enemies. Nazi Germany sought to break down its opponents by military force and also to implement the race-based, ideological strategy of mass murder (*Vernichtungskrieg*), developed several months before. These processes and the military operations of the Wehrmacht, occupying new territories and carrying out massacres, have been analyzed in detail.

Nevertheless, the war remains a source of significant controversy. Competition among groups that consider themselves victimized by this experience continues to fester, along with efforts to minimize or even deny their own responsibility for certain outcomes. Especially in East Central Europe, several communities see this war not as the past but as a highly contentious present. Competition and confrontation among memories make it difficult for societies in the region to achieve mutual understanding as they reflect upon painful and traumatic historical experiences, contributing to the re-emergence of anti-Semitic rhetoric.

The Conference aims to trace the origins of the current situation and generate a discussion on how to improve this state of affairs. Accordingly, the two-day event will focus not only on the mass violence that took place in 1941 and the narratives that seek to explain it but to trace how testimonies to the events have influenced the evolution of public memory and the formation of prevailing narratives.

A Divisive Past:

The Soviet-German War and Narratives of Mass Violence in East Central Europe

(Dedicated to the memory of Professor Irena Veisaitė)

Conference organisers:

Lithuanian Institute of History, Vilnius University
Department of History, Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Organizational committee:

Alvydas Nikžentaitis, Saulius Sužiedėlis, Arūnas Streikus, Nerijus Šepetys, Aurimas Švedas, Joachim Tauber

Conference location and time:

Vilnius Town Hall, Vilnius, June 4-5, 2021.

Conference organisers:



Conference partners:



Conference program:

Day I: Vilnius Town Hall

10:00 – 10:45 Welcome speeches

Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen / Speaker of Seimas
Ingrida Šimonytė / Prime Minister of the Republic of Lithuania (welcome letter)
Remigijus Šimašius / Mayor of Vilnius (video message)
Robert S. Gilchrist / United States Ambassador to Lithuania
Matthias Sonn / German Ambassador to Lithuania
Yossi Levy / Israeli ambassador to Lithuania
Alvydas Nikžentaitis / Director of the Lithuanian institute of History

10:45 – 11:45 Keynote presentations

Joachim Tauber (Germany), The Role of June 22, 1941 in the History of WWII and the Policy of Mass Murder of National Socialist Germany (online)

Adam Michnik (Poland), Narratives about Mass Violence and Heroism in East Central Europe

11:45 – 12:00 Coffee break

12:00 – 14:30 Panel 1. Vernichtungskrieg, Uprising and the Summer of 1941 in Eastern Europe: Sources and Narratives

Moderator: Vytautas Bruveris

Presenters:

Saulius Sužiedėlis (Lithuania/USA), What are the Sources Telling Us? War, Uprising and First Steps towards the Holocaust (online)
Vladislav Grinnevič (Ukraine), 22 June 1941: The Ukrainian view (online)
Stanislovas Stasiulis, (Lithuania), The Beginning of the War and the June Uprising in the Testimonies of the Contemporaries
Arūnas Bubnys (Lithuania) The participants of the June 1941 Uprising and the Holocaust
Dainius Noreika (Lithuania) What do we still not know about the June Uprising of 1941?

14:30 – 15:30 Lunch break

15:30 – 18:00 Panel 2. The Summer of 1941 in Eastern Europe: Multidimensionality of Witness Testimonies

Moderator: Arūnas Streikusdirektorius

Presenters:

Ronald Berger (USA), To Survive the Holocaust in Poland: Stories from Inside and Outside the Camps (online)
Hannah Pollin-Galay (Israel), How Catastrophe Began in Lithuania: The Ecologies of English, Hebrew and Yiddish Testimonies (online)
Anna Lipphardt (Germany) 1941 in the memories of Vilner Jews. Translocal perspectives from New York, Tel Aviv and Vilnius (online)
Nerijus Šepetys (Lithuania) Testimony and the beginning of war in Lithuania (Vilnius, Kaunas and the provinces). The challenge of understanding.

Day II: Vilnius Town Hall

11:00 – 13:30 Panel 3: Historical Evolution until 1989: War and the Holocaust Between Remembrance and Forgetting

Moderator: Aurimas Švedas

Presenters:

David Fishman (USA), Jewish Commemoration of the Holocaust in Vilnius 1944-1949 (online)
Andzej Zbikowski (Poland) The Case of Poland
László Karsai (Hungary), The Case of Hungary (online)
Zigmas Vitkus (Lithuania), The Case of Lithuania

13:30 – 14:30 Lunch break

14:30 – 16:00 Panel 4. Competition of Memories in Open Society. Round table discussion.

Moderator: Violeta Davoliūtė

Presenters:

Pawel Machcewicz (Poland), Westerplatte or Jedwabne
Andrii Portnov (Ukraine), Ukraine and the Second World War. Summarizing Thirty Years of Post-Soviet Memory Politics (online)
Vasilijus Safronovas (Lithuania), The Case of Lithuania: Deportations, the Holocaust, and the Fight for Freedom
Maren Röger (Germany), The Holocaust and/or German deportations (online)

16:00 – 16:15 Coffee break

16:15 – 16:45 Concluding keynote address: Tomas Venclova (Lithuania), Dialogical Memory as a Means of Conflict Resolution?